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ABSTRACT

Recurrent themes in the stories that young adults tell about their best friends and lovers and possible connections between levels of ego development and the ways that young adults talk about their closest relationships were explored using data from the Young Adult Development Project at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center. Luborsky's Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT) Method was used to code Relationship Episodes in the transcripts of the Early Adult Close Peer Relationship Interview conducted with young adults (N=20) who were asked to describe in depth their two closest relationships (one friend and one romantic relationship). The subjects' levels of ego development also were assessed using Loevinger's Sentence Completion Test. The findings revealed that the number of stories told by subjects was strongly correlated with their levels of ego development. A moderate correlation was found between the average complexity of relationship episodes and subjects' ego development scores. Subjects with higher ego development scores tended to tell longer stories. Men and women did not differ significantly in the number of stories they told about relationships or in the complexity of those stories. Preliminary findings suggest that ego development may be strongly correlated with the way people conceive of and describe their close relationships, particularly the frequency and complexity with which they describe specific interactions with other people. (NB)

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EGO DEVELOPMENT AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUNG ADULTS

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EGO DEVELOPMENT AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUNG ADULTS

Are there recurrent themes in the stories that young adults tell about their best friends and lovers? Are there connections between levels of ego development and the ways that young adults talk about their closest relationships?

We have been exploring these questions using data from the Young Adult Development Project at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center under the direction of Stuart Hauser. The Adolescent Phase of the Project has already been described to you by Andy Safyer. 98% of those subjects still living were studied again at age 24, and our data is from this second phase of the project.

Why are we interested in recurrent relationship themes? Throughout the psychological literature we find the idea that people approach others with pre-formed expectations about what relationships will be like. Freud originated the concept of transference, the idea that we learn how to relate to others based on our early life experiences with parents and other important people. According to Freud, we literally transfer feelings and expectations from these early relationships to later ones--especially from early relationships that have been frustrating or laden with conflict. The idea that each person has a central relationship pattern is reflected in Henry Murray's concept of the "unity-thema", in Sullivan's parataxic distortion, and in Tomkin's work on nuclear scripts.

Until recently, there has been little empirical research on the concept of a central relationship pattern. The most widely used instrument for assessing relationship themes reliably from interview material is Luborsky's Core Conflictual Relationship Theme Method, which we use in this study. I'll refer to it as the CCRT Method. Let me take a moment to explain this coding system. **[#1]** Using the CCRT Method, coders locate what are called Relationship Episodes in the transcript of an interview. Relationship episodes are vignettes that people tell about an interaction they had with another person, usually a specific incident like a date or an argument. The relationship episode has to be sufficiently detailed for the coder to score three specific components. These are the subject's wishes, the perceived responses of the other person to what the subject wants, and the subject's reactions to the other person. So, for example, the following is a simple relationship episode: **[#2]**

> I wanted my girlfriend to come over and watch a video, but she said she had to wash her hair and she wanted to spend the evening with her roommate. I told her it didn't matter, that she could do what she liked. When I got off the phone I was really pissed off, and I threw the phone against the wall.

[#3] This unhappy young man had a wish -- for his girlfriend to come over and spend time with him. She responded by saying no and telling him she preferred to be with someone else. He said it didn't matter, but he was angry and acted violently. The

coder would first identify these components and then describe them just as I have done. Finally, each component would be translated into the best fitting of eight standard categories. [#4] So, for example, the wish for his girlfriend to watch a video with him would get translated into the standard wish, "to be close", and her response that she wanted to spend the evening with her roommate would be coded, "prefers another person". Responses of the other and responses of the self are also coded as positive or negative from the subject's point of view. Each relationship episode is given a complexity rating, based on the number of different components present. The final set of scores is an assemblage of the most frequently occurring wishes, responses of the other, and responses of the self across all the relationship episodes in the interview. There is a solid body of work documenting the reliability and validity of the CCRT Method, and our coders achieved levels of interrater agreement ranging from 75% to 95% on the tasks described above.

We applied the CCRT Method to the Early Adult Close Peer Relationship Interview. This is a semistructured interview, developed by Lynne Schultz and her colleagues, that asks young adults to describe in depth their two closest relationships--one friend and one romantic relationship. The interview probes recent experiences of intimacy, autonomy, and conflict resolution within each of these two relationships.

In a separate assessment, we also looked at these young adult subjects' levels of ego development. Ego development is a

construct that encompasses social and emotional development, including ways of perceiving the self, significant others, and the surrounding world, and also one's predominant style of dealing with impulses. In other research, higher levels of ego development have been associated with greater nurturance, trust, interpersonal sensitivity, and inner control. Lower levels are associated with greater mistrust and impulsivity. We measured ego development in our young adult subjects using Loevinger's Sentence Completion Test, a 36 item test in which subjects' responses are assigned to one of ten stages of ego development. From this scoring one can derive an ordinal stage score, or as we have done, a continuous item sum score of ego development. A large literature supports favorable reliability and validity for the SCT. CCRT coders were blind to subjects' scores on the SCT.

Our complete study sample will be 40 subjects, who we'll be looking at in their adolescent years as well in young adulthood. I'm going to report on preliminary analyses of data from 20 subjects, 11 men and 9 women.

How did these subjects tell stories about their closest relationships? How many did they tell, how long were they, and how complex? **[#5]** We looked first at the number of stories told during the interview. The number of codable relationship episodes ranged from 7 to 41. As we expected, the number of stories told was strongly correlated with their levels of ego development ($r=0.71^{****}$). To give us a rating of the complexity of each story, we summed the number of wishes and responses in each

relationship episode. To qualify for coding, relationship episodes must have a minimum of 3 components but some had up to 23 wishes and responses, and these were very complicated stories indeed. We found a moderate correlation between the average complexity of relationship episodes and subjects' ego development scores ($r=0.44^{*}$). We also looked at the average length of relationship episodes, which ranged from 4 to 30 standardized lines of text. Subjects with higher ego development scores tended to tell longer stories ($r=0.40$). Contrary to what we expected, men and women did not differ significantly in the number of stories they told about relationships, or in the complexity of those stories.

We assigned a positive or negative valence to each response of other and response of the self to determine the frequency with which stories had good or bad outcomes from the subjects' point of view. So, for example, in the relationship episode I just showed you, the girlfriend's responses to the speaker, and the speaker's angry and violent reactions would all be coded as negative. We hypothesized that subjects at higher levels of ego development would show greater ambivalence--that is, a mixture of positive and negative responses of other and self--while those at lower levels would show a preponderance of either positive or negative ROs and RSs. However, in these preliminary analyses, ego development does not seem to predict the preponderance of positive or negative outcomes to relationship episodes.

So far, I've reported on the form in which our subjects tell

about relationships. What about the content, the relationship themes themselves? We plan to correlate these with levels of ego development when our entire sample of 40 subjects is ready to be analyzed. For now, I'd like to show you two prototypical cases to give you a sense of the content of these stories and how they may relate to level of ego development:

Here are two male subjects: **[#6]** Number 880 has a low ego development score, and as you can see he told only 7 stories about relationships during the interview. Each story had an average of only four components. By contrast, Number 928, who scored very high on the Loevinger SCT, told 29 stories during the same semi-structured interview, and each had an average of 12 to 13 separate components.

Their wishes in the stories they tell are not very different: both of them most frequently express the wish to be close. But the responses they perceive from others and the ways they react to the interactions with their friends are markedly different. Subject 880 sees more negative than positive responses from other people, particularly rejecting and opposing ones. Subject 928 experiences many more positive than negative responses from other people, and he most frequently feels that people understand him. Subject 880 has overwhelmingly negative responses to interactions with his two closest friends -- most often disappointment and depression. Subject 928 responds in predominantly positive ways, feeling respected and accepted by others and feeling that he is helpful to others. In these case

examples we see a relation between higher ego development score and more positive experiences with other people. Whether this will hold when we analyze our entire sample remains to be seen.

This is a preliminary report on only half the subjects we plan to analyze, so our conclusions must be limited. Even so, some interesting trends have emerged. It seems that ego development may be strongly correlated with the way people conceive of and describe their close relationships--particularly the frequency and complexity with which they describe specific interactions with other people.

Gender does not seem to be an important factor here: contrary to our expectation, young adult women did not tell more stories about relationships than men, nor were the women's stories more complex. This runs counter to recent gender-related theories of development that posit women as more concerned with and attuned to relationships than men. It suggests that ego development may be the more salient variable here. An alternative explanation is that our finding reflects the normative developmental tasks of young adulthood, when people of both genders show heightened concern about establishing intimate relationships.

In the two young adult men I described, perceptions of other people and responses to others varied considerably, but their basic wishes did not. Whether these differences are correlated with levels of ego development is a question we hope to explore more systematically when we have finished our analysis of the

entire study sample.

In the next phase of this study, we will look at these same subjects during adolescence, coding adolescent interview material using the CCRT Method. In this way we hope to examine continuities and discontinuities in relationship themes as our subjects make the transition from adolescence to early adulthood.

CORE CONFLICTUAL RELATIONSHIP THEME (CCRT) METHOD

COMPONENTS OF EACH RELATIONSHIP EPISODE (RE):

WISHES (W) = WHAT THE SUBJECT WANTS, NEEDS FROM THE OTHER

RESPONSES OF THE OTHER (RO) = HOW THE OTHER RESPONDS TO THE WISH

RESPONSES OF THE SELF (RS) = THE SUBJECT'S RESPONSES TO THE OTHER

#2

A RELATIONSHIP EPISODE

I wanted my girlfriend to come over and watch a video, but she said she had to wash her hair and she wanted to spend the evening with her roommate. I told her it didn't matter, that she could do what she liked. When I got off the phone I was really pissed off, and I threw the phone against the wall.

A RELATIONSHIP EPISODE

RE - GIRLFRIEND

(W)
W- I wanted my girlfriend to come over and watch a video, but she said she

(RO)
RO- had to wash her hair and she wanted to spend the evening with her roommate.

(RS)
RS- I told her it didn't matter, that she could do what she liked. When I got

(RS)
RS- off the phone I was really pissed off,

(RS)
RS- and I threw the phone against the wall.

A RELATIONSHIP EPISODE

RE - GIRLFRIEND

W- To be close → *(W)* **I wanted my girlfriend to come over and watch a video, but she said she**

RO- Prefers another person → *(RO)* **had to wash her hair and she wanted to spend the evening with her roommate.**

RS- Minimize → *(RS)* **I told her it didn't matter, that she could do what she liked. When I got**

RS- Angry → *(RS)* **off the phone I was really pissed off,**

RS- Act violently → *(RS)* **and I threw the phone against the wall.**

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PEARSON CORRELATIONS

(N = 20)

EGO DEVELOPMENT SCORES (Loevinger SCT ISS) AND:

1) Number of REs	r = 0.71****
2) Average complexity of REs	r = 0.44*
3) Average length of REs	r = 0.40
4) Valence (+ vs. - ROs & RSs)	r = 0.07

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*	$p < 0.05$
**	$p < 0.01$
***	$p < 0.001$
****	$p < 0.0001$

#6

COMPARISON OF TWO SUBJECTS

AT HIGH AND LOW LEVELS OF EGO DEVELOPMENT

	Subject 880	Subject 928
	Pre-conformist	Post-conformist
ISS	143	243
# of REs	7	29
COMPLEXITY	4.0	12.5
WISHES	4 total To be close (2) To assert self (1)	8 total To be close (4) To control others (2)
ROs	11 total (4+,7-) Are rejecting (4) Are bad (2)	29 total (20+,9-) Are understanding (13) Are strong (6)
RSs	14 total (1+,13-) Feel disappointed & depressed (7)	30 total (24+,6-) Feel respected & accepted (9) Feel helpful (8)